

Competitive Exams: William Shakespeare Hamlet Overview

The most influential writer in all of English literature, William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to a successful middle-class glove-maker in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Shakespeare attended grammar school, but his formal education proceeded no further. In 1582 he married an older woman, Anne Hathaway, and had three children with her. Around 1590 he left his family behind and traveled to London to work as an actor and playwright. Public and critical success quickly followed, and Shakespeare eventually became the most popular playwright in England and part-owner of the Globe Theater. His career bridged the reigns of Elizabeth I (ruled 1558-1603) and James I (ruled 1603-1625), and he was a favorite of both monarchs. Indeed, James granted Shakespeare's company the greatest possible compliment by bestowing upon its members the title of King's Men. Wealthy and renowned, Shakespeare retired to Stratford and died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. At the time of Shakespeare's death, literary luminaries such as Ben Jonson hailed his works as timeless.

Shakespeare's works were collected and printed in various editions in the century following his death, and by the early eighteenth century his reputation as the greatest poet ever to write in English was well established. The unprecedented admiration garnered by his works led to a fierce curiosity about Shakespeare's life, but the dearth of biographical information has left many details of Shakespeare's personal history shrouded in mystery. Some people have concluded from this fact that Shakespeare's plays were really written by someone else. Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford are the two most popular candidates but the support for this claim is overwhelmingly circumstantial, and the theory is not taken seriously by many scholars.

In the absence of credible evidence to the contrary, Shakespeare must be viewed as the author of the thirty-seven plays and 154 sonnets that bear his name. The legacy of this body of work is immense. A number of Shakespeare's plays seem to have transcended even the category of brilliance, becoming so influential as to profoundly affect the course of Western literature and culture ever after:

Written during the first part of the seventeenth century (probably in 1600 or 1601), Hamlet was probably first performed in July 1602. It was first published in printed form in 1603 and appeared in an enlarged edition in 1604. As was common practice during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Shakespeare borrowed for his plays ideas and stories from earlier literary works. He could have taken the story of Hamlet from several possible sources, including a twelfth-century Latin history of Denmark compiled by Saxo Grammaticus and a prose work by the French writer Francois de Belleforest, entitled *Histoires Tragiques*.

The raw material that Shakespeare appropriated in writing Hamlet is the story of a Danish prince whose uncle murders the prince's father, marries his mother, and claims the throne. The

prince pretends to be feeble-minded to throw his uncle off guard, then manages to kill his uncle in revenge. Shakespeare changed the emphasis of this story entirely, making his Hamlet a philosophically-minded prince who delays taking action because his knowledge of his uncle's crime is so uncertain. Shakespeare went far beyond making uncertainty a personal quirk of Hamlet's, introducing a number of important ambiguities into the play that even the audience cannot resolve with certainty. For instance, whether Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, shares in Claudius's guilt; whether Hamlet continues to love Ophelia even as he spurns her, in Act III; whether Ophelia's death is suicide or accident; whether the ghost offers reliable knowledge, or seeks to deceive and tempt Hamlet; and, perhaps most importantly, whether Hamlet would be morally justified in taking revenge on his uncle. Shakespeare makes it clear that the stakes riding on some of these questions are enormous the actions of these characters bring disaster upon an entire kingdom. At the play's end it is not even clear whether justice has been achieved.

By modifying his source materials in this way, Shakespeare was able to take an unremarkable revenge story and make it resonate with the most fundamental themes and problems of the Renaissance. The Renaissance is a vast cultural phenomenon that began in fifteenth-century Italy with the recovery of classical Greek and Latin texts that had been lost to the Middle Ages. The scholars who enthusiastically rediscovered these classical texts were motivated by an educational and political ideal called (in Latin) *humanitas* the idea that all of the capabilities and virtues peculiar to human beings should be studied and developed to their furthest extent. Renaissance humanism, as this movement is now called, generated a new interest in human experience, and also an enormous optimism about the potential scope of human understanding. Hamlet's famous speech in Act II, What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals (II. ii. 293-297)! is directly based upon one of the major texts of the Italian humanists, Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. For the humanists, the purpose of cultivating reason was to lead to a better understanding of how to act, and their fondest hope was that the coordination of action and understanding would lead to great benefits for society as a whole.

As the Renaissance spread to other countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, a more skeptical strain of humanism developed, stressing the limitations of human understanding. For example, the sixteenth-century French humanist, Michel de Montaigne, was no less interested in studying human experiences than the earlier humanists were, but he maintained that the world of experience was a world of appearances, and that human beings could never hope to see past those appearances into the realities that lie behind them. This is the world in which Shakespeare places his characters. Hamlet is faced with the difficult task of correcting an injustice that he can never have sufficient knowledge of a dilemma that is by no means unique, or even uncommon. And while Hamlet is fond of pointing out questions that cannot be answered because they concern supernatural and metaphysical matters, the play as a whole chiefly demonstrates the difficulty of knowing the truth about other people their guilt or innocence, their motivations, their feelings, their relative states of sanity or insanity. The world

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of other people is a world of appearances, and Hamlet is, fundamentally, a play about the difficulty of living in that world.